Environmental Assessment
for the
West Fork Cow Creek Road Gate

EA OR-110-00- _19__

Purpose and Need

In February, 2000, the Oregon State Police requested that the Medford District, BLM install a gate on the West Fork Cow Creek road to reduce salmon poaching. Installing a gate would have other benefits since this road runs along the main stem of the West Fork Cow Creek, a major anadromous fish stream and it is located in a Tier 1 Key watershed.

The proposed gate would be located on the West Fork Cow Creek road (rd. 32-8-1.1) at the junction with road 31-9-27, in T 31S, R 9W, sec. 27. The site is located approximately 25 miles northwest of Grants Pass, Oregon (See Map 1 for location).

Key Issues

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) calls for focusing environmental assessments on Key Issues. The Key Issues identified for this proposal include:

1. Access to private property.
2. Impacts to anadromous fish species.
3. Recreational opportunities
4. Administrative access to BLM lands and structures.
5. Port Orford Cedar root rot.

Affected Environment

A characterization of the West Fork Cow Creek watershed may be found in the West Fork Cow Creek Ecosystem Analysis(1997), available for review at the BLM Medford District Office, Medford, Oregon. This Ecosystem Analysis is also available for review at the Medford District web site: www.or.blm.gov/Medford .

The area has BLM lands and private industrial forest lands interspersed in a checkerboard pattern. The waterfall where poaching occurs, located in T 32S R 9W Section 33, is a barrier to passage of adult anadromous fish under certain stream flow conditions. The West Fork Cow Creek road in this area runs close to West Fork Cow Creek, for approximately 4.3 miles beyond the proposed gate location at the junction with road 31-9-27, before the road crosses the creek. The bridge across the creek at this location has been out for several years, eliminating access to lands across the creek during the time of year when stream flows are high.

The area receives moderate recreational use, generally from car campers using small dispersed, undeveloped camp sites along the creek during the summer and from big game hunters in the fall.

The West Fork Cow Creek watershed has been designated a Tier 1 Key Watershed in the RMP. The creek is considered to be a high quality anadromous fisheries stream, especially for steelhead and coho salmon. Coho salmon are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Steelhead trout are a candidate species. Umpqua cutthroat trout were de-listed from endangered status on April 17, 2000. The streams in this area are closed to sport fishing to protect spawning fish, which would be highly vulnerable in the relatively small streams.

Alternative 1. Proposed Action

The proposed gate would be located on the West Fork Cow Creek road (rd. 32-8-1.1) at the junction with road 31-9-27, in T 31S, R 9W, sec. 27, 1.8 miles from the falls. If heavy equipment is used to install the gate, the installation work would not be allowed between March 1st and June 15th. Because the project site is within 35 miles of the coast heavy equipment work would be limited to between 2 hours after sunrise to 2 hours before sunset from April 1st through August 6th to avoid disturbance to any marbled murrelet nesting in the vicinity. The Oregon State Police suggested this gate could be closed during the period Jan 1 - May 31 to protect runs of steelhead trout from poaching. During this period, the road would be officially designated as closed to motor vehicle traffic under the regulations in 43 CFR 8341. Persons violating this closure would be cited and prosecuted under these regulations.

Alternative 2.

Under this alternative, the proposed gate would be located on the West Fork Cow Creek road (rd. 32-8-1.1) at a rock quarry in T 31S R 9W Sec 28, approximately 1.1 miles from the falls. This location is approximately 3/4 mile west of the location alternative 1. Other details of the proposal would be the same as in Alternative 1.

Alternative 3.

Under this alternative, the road would be permanently closed with a barricade at the same location as the gate in Alternative 1. The barricade could be removed periodically for road maintenance needs, or to allow access for management actions on federal or private lands, but would be replaced following the necessary work. Other actions specified in Alternative 1 would also be applied under this alternative.

Alternative 4. No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, no road closure would be implemented and the current situation would be retained.

Environmental Consequences

This section discusses the environmental impacts (beneficial or adverse) which could result from the implementation of the Alternatives.

Alternative 1

Approximately 6.4 miles of existing roads would be closed seasonally with a gate at the junction of road #31-9-27 for a period of five months during winter and spring. Roads behind the gate could be frequently inspected and routinely maintained without incurring the inconvenience or delay of removing a barricade. Potential for fish poaching would be appreciably reduced if the gate is located so that the poachers cannot get around the gate with an ATV. Elk and deer hunters would have access to the area during the general hunting season. Harassment and poaching of deer and elk during winter outside established hunting seasons would be reduced. Recreational placer mining would not be affected since the road closure period is outside the ODFW authorized in-stream work period. Recreational camping should not be affected since most activity other than hunting occurs during the summer months. There would be no adverse effect on sport fishing, since the streams in this area are closed to all fishing. Other commercial forest landowners behind the gate would have access to their lands year-round, as they do now. A gate would not prevent ODFW employees doing salmon and steelhead surveys from accessing the area. The potential for the general public to spread Port Orford cedar root rot spores would be reduced because potential for spread is greatest during winter months.

No aquatic habitat or watershed indicator in the National Marine Fisheries Service Matrix Checklist would be degraded in the long term at the fifth-field watershed scale (West Fork Cow Creek). The action alternatives are therefore consistent with Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives.

Although this project would not reduce road density, gating or barricading would help to reduce localized impacts to fish, wildlife and possibly to water quality. The project would help protect a wild stock of steelhead which is designated a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act. With the intermingled pattern of federal and non-federal land ownership in this area, opportunities for large scale seasonal road closures are limited due to a variety of needs for the existing road system.

Alternative 2

In alternative 2, approximately 5.4 miles of existing roads would be closed seasonally with a gate at the rock quarry. This alternative would block the road closer to the falls, so it is more likely that poachers would be able to access the falls even if the gate remained closed, than under Alternative 1. In addition, the location of the gate in this location would make it more difficult to monitor and enforce the closure, than in the location on the major arterial road location in Alternative 1. On the other hand, this location has a much better turn-around location than if the gate were installed at the beginning of the road, as in Alternative 1. Other impacts would be similar to Alternative 1.

Alternative 3

Roads behind the barricade would not be inspected frequently because the barricade would restrict the use of vehicles for road inspection. Problems related to road stability and water quality would not be discovered and corrected in a timely manner. The public would be prevented from using campsites along the West Fork throughout the year. BLM would incur costs of opening and closing the road when other commercial forest landowners behind the barricade demand access. A barricade would make it more difficult for ODFW salmon and steelhead surveyors to access the area. Potential for the general public to spread Port Orford cedar root rot spores would be reduced because potential for spread is greatest during winter months. However, a barricade would most likely be more effective in preventing the poaching, and would not be subject to vandalism.

There is one valid placer mining claim in Section T 31S, R 9W, sec.33 behind the proposed gate or barricade. At this point it is unclear whether the claimant requires access to his claim via the West Fork Cow Creek Road. If so, the claimant would be denied access if a barricade is installed.

Alternative 4, No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, fish poaching would continue. Roads would be accessible to recreationists and mining claimants year- round. Roads could be inspected and maintained at the current frequency.

Cumulative Effects

Road closures, decommissioning, renovation and construction planned under other recent environmental assessments for the West Fork Cow Creek watershed include:

Rock the Panther Creek road: 0.5 miles 1995
Wallace Creek Road renovation: 2.5 miles 1995
Lower Walker Creek Road renovation: 2.2 miles 1997
Bear Creek Road drainage improvement; 5.8 miles 1997
Gold Mountain Creek Road stabilization: 0.1 miles 1997
East Fork Elk Valley Creek culvert replacement for fish passage: 1997
West Fork Elk Valley Creek culvert replacement for fish passage: 1998
Lower Walker Creek Road improvement: 0.5 miles 1999
Golden Panther Thin timber sale road drainage improvement/barricaded: 2.7 miles and road renovation on another 44 miles 1998?
Mules Brew timber sale: decommission 0.4 miles of road and improve drainage on another 4.8 miles
Key Elk timber sale: decommission 1.4 miles of road; replace culvert for fish passage; renovate 30.2 miles of road. . Sold 1998 but not awarded
Middle Walker Road slide stabilization: 0.1 mile Planned summer 2000

Bear Pen TS - EA is being developed
Willy Slide TS - EA is being developed

Road construction on non-federal lands is occurring, but data is not available on the mileage of roads constructed or planned to be constructed in the near future.

Monitoring

The gate or barricade would be monitored annually to determine if it is still effectively controlling motor vehicle traffic.

Persons and Agencies Consulted

Adjacent landowners and land owners affected by the proposals have been contacted by phone and by letter. Concerns raised by these parties have been incorporated into the design of the proposed action. A copy of this EA will be sent to those parties so they can assess potential impacts to access to their property.

The notification that this EA is available for review will be published in local newspapers. The EA will be sent to several interested parties who have requested to be on the mailing list for such documents. In addition, several state agencies and local governments will be notified.

Changes in the preliminary proposal as well as project design features may be based on information received from the public.

List of Preparers

Name	Title	Primary Responsibility
Randy Bryan	Lead Civil Engineering Technician	Roads
Bob Bessey	Fish Biologist	Fish/Fish habitat
Doug Goldenberg	Botanist	Plants
Jen Sanborn	Wildlife Biologist	Terrestrial Animals/Habitat

Reviewed By:

Roger Schrader — 5-19-00

Glendale RA Ecosystem Planner
for format and adequacy — Date

Lynda L Boody — 5/22/00

Lynda L. Boody
Field Manager, Glendale Resource Area
Medford District, BLM — Date

Map 1
Vicinity Map for Gate Location
T31S R9W